

Praying with Paul

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[0 : 00] Amen. So, what gift can you get for the man or woman who has everything?

You sometimes see articles in magazines and newspaper supplements that ask that question. They try to answer the question, not entirely seriously.

They often suggest quirky and unusual gifts. Because after all, the man or woman who has everything doesn't really need anything.

So, you have to work hard to find something they won't have. You could say that the passage we're looking at this evening answers a similar question.

Listen, what do you pray for? For someone, for a Christian who has everything.

[1 : 37] What do you pray for? For a Christian who has everything. Why do I say that? Well, earlier in his letter, in this letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul has described Christians as having been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

And he has listed the blessings Christians have received. Let me remind you of some of them. We were chosen in eternity past to be holy and blameless in God's sight.

We were predestined for adoption into his family. Through Christ's death on the cross, we've been rescued from slavery to sin and been fully and freely forgiven.

We've been made heirs to a glorious inheritance. We've received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We belong to a worldwide family in which distinctions of race, gender, class or background are of no consequence.

We're part of a new humanity. These are amazing blessings. If we're trusting in the Lord Jesus, if we're united to him by faith, all these blessings are ours.

[3 : 02] No wonder Paul says that we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. So what more could we possibly need?

What more could we possibly want? It's in the context of all these blessings that Paul introduces the prayer which we have in these verses in Ephesians chapter 3.

Actually, most of Ephesians chapter 3 is an extended parenthesis. It's an interruption to Paul's main line of thought.

Paul begins the chapter by saying, For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles. But he doesn't finish off the sentence at that point.

Instead, he launches into an explanation of his role as an apostle to the Gentiles. It's only in verse 14 that Paul resumes his earlier train of thought.

[4 : 11] There he repeats the words, For this reason, To indicate that he's going back to what he was saying before he got sidetracked.

It's worth noting in passing that the Bible is both human and divine. In the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy, All scripture is breathed out by God.

The men who wrote the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit. They wrote just what God wanted them to write. But they weren't mere dictating machines.

The Holy Spirit didn't override their personalities or iron out their idiosyncrasies. The doctrine of inspiration allows for interrupted thought and messy syntax such as we have here.

So at verse 14, Paul turns to prayer in the light of all that God has revealed of himself and of his purposes, which he has now shared with the Ephesians.

[5 : 27] Paul prays in view of all that God has done and all he has promised to do. Let's learn then from what Paul prays for.

The first thing I'd like to highlight is the challenge that the prayer implies. The challenge that the prayer implies.

There's an implied challenge in the prayer. Let me explain. Paul prays that the Holy Spirit might strengthen the Ephesian Christians with power in their inner being.

He prays that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith. But the Spirit is already at work in them. Christ already lives in them by his Spirit.

Otherwise, they wouldn't be Christians at all. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. There's no such thing as a Christian in whom Christ does not live by his Spirit.

[6 : 41] Paul cannot possibly be praying here that the Ephesian Christians might experience fellowship with Christ and the power of the Spirit for the very first time.

It has to be that he wants the Ephesians to experience Christ's fellowship and the Spirit's power in greater measure.

He wants them to know Christ better, to live in greater dependence on the Holy Spirit. Paul also prays here that the Ephesians may know the love of Christ.

If they're Christians, they already know it. The implication again of Paul's prayer is that there's more to be known.

There's more to be experienced. There's room for progress. That's the challenge. Let's think about that for a moment.

[7 : 44] Christians have in Christ received every spiritual blessing in principle. But we don't yet have full enjoyment of every blessing.

In terms of our status before God, we're holy and blameless in God's sight. Christ's righteousness has been put to our account.

But we're not yet holy and blameless in practice. We're no longer slaves to sin, but we still sin.

We have received forgiveness, and yet we still need daily forgiveness for daily sins. We're heirs to a glorious inheritance.

But as yet, all we've received is the down payment. As regards the blessings which are ours in Christ, we need to distinguish between the now and the not yet.

[8 : 55] We enjoy the blessings in a measure now, but we don't yet enjoy them fully. And yet, we can and should enjoy them more and more here and now.

That's the implication of Paul's prayer. Progress is possible. The Christian life isn't static. It's dynamic. There's more to be enjoyed.

There's more to be experienced. There's more to the Christian life than simply becoming a Christian. We don't sit back and fold our arms because we've got it all.

There's a life to be lived. There's a race to be run. There's a fight to be fought. We may not be sinless, but we should sin less.

The Christian life is sometimes said to be about becoming what we are. I rather like that. Becoming what we are.

[10 : 05] If we're Christians, we're holy as regards our status before God. That's what we are. But the challenge for us is to become more holy in practice, to become what we are.

If we're Christians, we're God's adopted sons and daughters. That's what we are. The challenge is to become more like sons and daughters of the living God in how we behave.

We need to become what we are. Saintry Christians write down church history were very aware of the need to make progress in the Christian life.

They weren't satisfied with what they had already attained. Most of you probably have heard of the Reverend Robert Murray McChain who was a minister in Dundee in the mid-19th century.

He used to pray, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be. This was his conviction.

[11 : 24] I am persuaded that I shall obtain the highest amount of present happiness. I shall do most for God's glory and the good of man and I shall have the fullest reward in eternity.

by maintaining a conscience always washed in Christ's blood, by being filled with the Holy Spirit at all times and by attaining the most entire likeness to Christ in mind, will and heart that is possible for a redeemed sinner to attain to in this world.

Make me as holy as a pardoned sinner. can be. The Christian life means lifelong obedience to Christ.

It's a long obedience in the same direction. It can't be reduced to an initial response to a gospel invitation. It can't be reduced to a decision made months or perhaps years ago.

The Christian life is as much about how we are living now. The apostle Paul came to faith as a result of his encounter with the ascended Christ on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus.

[12 : 45] But he writes to the Galatian Christians, the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God. Elsewhere he says, one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

You see, Paul didn't live in the past. He wanted to make progress in his Christian life and his ambition for the Ephesian Christians was the same. He wanted them to grow in their faith, to grow in practical holiness, to become what they were.

That's the challenge which is implied in this prayer. And the same challenge comes to us if we claim to be followers of the Lord Jesus.

Are you, am I becoming what we are? Are we growing as Christians? Are we making progress or are we putting little or no effort into our Christian lives and slipping back?

[14 : 02] If that's the case, then we need to ask ourselves if we're Christians at all. That's the implied challenge of Paul's prayer.

But secondly, more particularly, let's look at the requests Paul makes. There are basically three requests. requests and it's as if they build up towards a climax.

The first request is in verse 16. Paul prays that according to the riches of his glory, the Father may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

I think we should treat this as one request since it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ dwells in our hearts. Paul wants the Holy Spirit to empower the Ephesians and he wants Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith.

faith. I wonder if you've noticed how the question, where do you stay, can have different meanings north and south of the border.

[15 : 26] Here in Scotland, folk will often ask the question, where do you stay, expecting to find out where you live, where your residence is.

But in England, if you ask the question, where do you stay, folk usually assume that you're referring to some sort of short-term residence.

You stay in a hotel or guest house if you're on holiday or away in business. If you want to know where someone's home is, the question you ask is, where do you live?

the verb to live denotes permanent residence rather than temporary occupation. Well, the Greek word which is translated in verse 17 as dwell denotes permanent occupation.

Christ already indwells the Ephesian Christians. But what Paul wants is that he might enjoy all the benefits of a permanent resident.

[16 : 38] He wants Christ to feel more and more at home in their hearts. How does that come about? By the work of the Holy Spirit.

It's through his Spirit Christ lives in us. It's the Spirit who makes Jesus real to us. The Holy Spirit has to do his work in us. His power is indispensable.

At the same time Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. And faith is something we have to exercise even though it's not something we do in our own strength.

We need to cooperate with the Spirit. We need to read our Bibles, to pray, to meet regularly with our fellow Christians. As we do these things the Holy Spirit grows our faith.

He enables us to lean more on Jesus and live in greater dependence on him. A minister I knew used to say that no one has less of God than he or she really wants.

[17 : 53] No one has less of God than he or she really wants. I think he had a point.

We do not have because we do not ask and we do not ask because we do not really want. We need to see our need of the Holy Spirit's power.

We need our faith to be strengthened and to grow. Are these things you pray for for yourself and for others?

Paul's second request is in verses 17 and 18. There he writes that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Paul mixes his metaphors. He speaks of the Ephesians being rooted in love. He's thinking of them as plants which have their roots deep in the soil of love.

[19 : 15] And then he speaks of them as grounded in love. This is an architectural metaphor. Paul is thinking of love as the foundation on which the Ephesians build their lives.

Paul sees love, love for God and love for others as the natural outworking of a life of faith. Elsewhere he speaks of faith working by love.

That's what practical godliness looks like. And it's only as we live like that that we can truly know Christ's love for us.

We love him because he first loved us. But as our love for him deepens, we understand and appreciate his love for us all the more.

There's something of a chain reaction. To know Christ's love is more than intellectual comprehension. It's experiential knowledge, it's heart knowledge and it's transformational.

[20 : 22] when Paul speaks here of the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, he's using interesting spatial terms.

I think he's trying to get across just how vast Christ's love is. These words remind me of the old children's chorus. Jesus' love is very wonderful.

Jesus' love is very wonderful. so high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't encompass it.

Oh, what wonderful love. Think of the lengths to which Christ's love took him.

he was equal with God, he was God the Son, and yet he came into our world, into a fallen world.

[21 : 26] He took upon him, as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, the form of a servant. He went down, down, down, down to death, even death on a cross.

That gives us some idea of the depth of Christ's love. Christ's love embraces the unlovely.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Christ's love reaches out to those who are his enemies. My song is love unknown.

My Saviour's love to me, love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be. Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

In verse 19, Paul says something very striking. He describes Christ's love as surpassing knowledge. The love he wants the Ephesians to know is a love that can never be fully known.

[22 : 48] There will always be more to know. There will never be a time, even in eternity, when God's people will have grasped it completely.

And note too how in verse 18, Paul prays for Christ's love to be known with all the saints. There's a sense in which this is a corporate activity.

We need one another fully to explore and exalt in the love of Christ. So can I ask you this evening, do you pray to know Christ's love more and more and to live in the good of it.

That's what Paul prayed for, for the Ephesian Christians. And it's something we need too. Paul's final request is in verse 19, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This is the climax of his prayer. Paul wants the Ephesian Christians to be filled with all the fullness of God and so be transformed into his image.

[24 : 09] As they live in dependence in Christ by the power of the Spirit, as they grasp his love with ever-increasing clarity, Paul expects them to receive from God all that he has for them and to be transformed into his likeness.

He expects them to assume more of the family likeness. The Apostle John writes, We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.

And even now it's possible for Christians to become more and more like their Savior. That's why John goes on to say, Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Is that true of you? Is that true of me? Three great requests for the Spirit's strengthening and Christ's indwelling, to know Christ's love, and to be filled with all the fullness of God.

These are big requests. They're big. But are they impossible? Could the Ephesians have any confidence that Paul's prayer for them would be answered?

[25 : 33] What grounds do we have for making the same requests for ourselves? Let's consider then thirdly the provision that's assured.

The provision that's assured. Look at what Paul says in verse 16. He prays that the Father would strengthen the Ephesians with power through his Spirit in their inner being according to the riches of his glory.

According to the riches of his glory. That's the measure Paul has in mind as he prays. He's addressing a God whose glory is infinite and whose riches are limitless.

can he do what Paul asks? Of course he can given the riches of his glory. And look at how Paul describes the Lord in verse 20.

So bless each one of us and meet our needs we pray. We pray with confidence because you are a God who is able to do for us more than we can ask or even think far more.
Yours are limitless resources. We pray in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.